

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000120

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, DRL, SA/INS, DRL/BA

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/13

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PTER CE LTTE

SUBJECT: Forcible recruitment of children by the LTTE remains a serious problem, with no quick fix in sight

Refs: Colombo 113, and previous

(U) Classified by Charge d'Affaires Lewis Amselem.  
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Forcible recruitment of children by the Tamil Tigers remains a serious problem, especially in eastern Sri Lanka. The extent of the practice remains unclear, however, with contacts divided as to whether or not it is a worsening problem. The UN and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) are pressing the Tigers to clean up their act. Our assessment is that this issue is not going away any time soon. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) A SERIOUS PROBLEM: Forcible recruitment of children by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) remains a serious problem. Tamil contacts, including some who are pro-LTTE, regularly report to Mission that LTTE personnel are forcing children as young as ten into political and military training. In addition, Sri Lankan newspapers carry stories almost every day about forcible recruitment by the LTTE, as well as reports about children who have escaped from the group. (Note: There are also reports of voluntary returns by the LTTE, but these are more rare.) One recent newspaper story that was particularly poignant reported that in Batticaloa a young girl, apparently backed by her family, was threatening to kill herself by lighting herself on fire. She claimed that her brother had been abducted by the LTTE and she wanted the group to release him. (Note: It is not clear what the exact denouement of this incident was, but the girl did not kill herself.)

3. (U) With respect to location, most of the reported abductions take place in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. Some abductions also occur in Jaffna District and along the GSL-LTTE "line of control" near Vavuniya, a city in north-central Sri Lanka. Children are also recruited with some regularity in the LTTE-controlled Wanni region. There are no reports of abductions of children from the large Tamil community in Colombo.

4. (U) EXTENT UNCLEAR: The extent of forcible recruitment of children by the LTTE remains unclear. Numbers, for example, are very hard to come by and there are sharp divisions on whether the problem is increasing.

5. (C) Some contacts, for example, report that the problem is essentially out-of-control and growing worse. In a January 22 meeting, Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke, the chief of the government's Peace Secretariat, told us that in the past several months

SIPDIS

upwards of 2,000 children may have been abducted by the LTTE. From what he had heard, very few of these children have, subsequently, been released by the LTTE or escaped from the group. Goonetilleke's comments track with those of Father Harry Miller (please protect), an Amcitt Catholic priest based in Batticaloa, who believes that "thousands" of children have been abducted by the LTTE in the past year. Goonetilleke, Miller, and some local NGOs in the east believe that the problem is decidedly on the upswing.

6. (C) On the flip side, respected international organizations are reporting that the problem is more limited in scope. UNICEF, for example, which has been dealing with this issue for some time, states that the number of forcible recruits was somewhat over one hundred in 2002. The Norwegian-run SLMM is reporting somewhat higher figures at upwards of 300 abducted children in 2002. In addition, UNICEF, the ICRC, and the SLMM all report that they believe that the child recruitment problem has been on the downswing in the past several months. The SLMM, for example, cites 28 reports in December 2002, down from 38 in November, which, in turn, was down from 60 in September.

(Note: The vast discrepancy between what Goonetilleke and Miller are hearing and what UNICEF and the SLMM are reporting is difficult to account for. That said, Goonetilleke's and Miller's estimates seem more anecdotal, whereas UNICEF and the SLMM are relying on actual "hard" reports. SLMM contacts have wondered whether the reports they are receiving only constitute the "tip of the iceberg" of the problem.)

17. (SBU) PRESSING THE TIGERS: The UN and the SLMM are stepping up their pressure on the Tigers to clean up their act, urging the group to honor its prior commitments. (Note: On numerous occasions, the LTTE has pledged it will stop recruiting children.) UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy, for example, is due to visit Sri Lanka from January 30 - February 2. She is tentatively slated to meet with LTTE representatives during the visit. UNICEF reports that the issue of forcible recruitment of children will be high on Bellamy's agenda. We have also heard that UN SYG Annan plans to raise the issue when he visits Sri Lanka in late February.

18. (SBU) In the meantime, the SLMM continues to urge the LTTE publicly and in private to stop its recruitment efforts. The SLMM reports that its chief, Major General (ret'd) Trond Furuhoide, plans to raise the issue on January 22 in meetings with the LTTE. In addition to the UN and SLMM efforts, Ambassador Goonetilleke confirmed to us that human rights issues will form a major part of the agenda at the next round of peace talks scheduled for February 7-10. The issue will also be an important topic in GSL-LTTE peace sub-committee meetings.

19. (C) COMMENT: Our assessment is that this issue is not going away any time soon. Although they pay lip service to their previous commitments, the Tigers are evasive as to what they plan to do to stop child recruitment. With the onset of the peace process, however, it is getting increasingly difficult for the Tigers to hide what they are doing. Journalists and many others are visiting areas in the north and the east with some regularity now, and reports of what transpires in those areas are seeping out. (Note: See, for example, a January 6 article in THE NEW YORK TIMES spotlighting the child recruitment issue.) At the same time, if the Tiger leadership wanted to end child recruitment, it is not clear whether it has control of all of its cadre, especially those in the east. Overall, even in the best case scenario with the peace process continuing, we doubt that there will be a quick fix in this area soon. END COMMENT.

10. (U) Minimize considered.

AMSELEM